

Professor Jonathan Bate interviewed on *Today*

When Jonathan Bate's new biography of Ted Hughes was published this month, it was so well received and reviewed that it was shortlisted for the prestigious Samuel Johnson Prize, one of just 6 titles in the running. But within days the poets' widow, Carol Hughes, said the book was *offensive, contained significant errors* and she accused Professor Bate of *tasteless speculation*. Well, Jonathan Bate joins us from Oxford now – Good morning to you.

JB: Good Morning Sarah.

I'm tempted to say it had all been going so well.

JB: Well it was a rocky road all the way through with this project because originally it had the support of Carol Hughes the poet's widow and she then withdrew that support so I had to go it alone although fortunately I continued to get great help from Olwyn Hughes, Ted Hughes' sister and indeed from Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath's daughter Frieda.

Yes, it's called *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* making clear that it is unauthorised (at least by his estate). [She makes] a number of criticisms but one point she makes is that there are 18 factual errors or unsupported assertions in just 16 pages of the book that pertain directly to her. How do you answer that?

JB: Well in some cases they are not errors, in some cases she is complaining about what she calls unwarranted speculation but actually in all those cases what I'm doing is reporting what other family members particularly Ted's sister Olwyn thought. It's a fascinating thing isn't it that particularly at distressing times of people's lives (and she was particularly unhappy that I didn't mention her perspective on Ted Hughes' last days, well that was because I didn't speak to her whereas I did speak to his sister) people do remember things differently when they look back several years on and we all have our memories and I made it clear I was reporting Olwyn Hughes' version of Ted Hughes' last days, not Carol Hughes'.

One of the points that's been made by the estate that there was nothing to stop you from getting confirmation from her of the points in your book. Did you go to her, I mean clearly there was some reason you went from being an authorised biography to an unauthorised one (you had some sort of falling out) but did you actually send the transcript to her and just check for accuracy.

JB: No, what happened was that after she stopped cooperating with the book back in February 2014 I wrote to her and said how sorry I was but I said could she please still read the book to check the facts. I didn't get a word back from her for 16 months as I was completing the book and it was only this June when the book was finished, edited and days away from going to the typesetter that she did write and say would you like me to check the facts and it was just too late by then and I had to rely on fact-checking from many of Ted Hughes' other friends and particularly other family members: Olwyn, (his sister), Frieda (his daughter).

What do you do because obviously you've made the point before this book came out how important it is to be accurate in something and it's obviously something you pride yourself

on? What do you do about that? How do you address the things that presumably you now admit because you've said are inaccurate? Just certain facts there in the book

JB: There are a couple of very minor things I mean for example she says at one point in the book I refer to some Australian visitors coming to stay in Ted Hughes' cottage (a cottage he owned on Dartmoor), she said no actually someone else was in his cottage at that time, they stayed in the cottage of a friend. Those sorts of things of course I'll be able to correct when the book goes into paperback but they really are very very tiny points and as I say in some cases 2 different people who were at the same place at the same time have a different memory of it.

And for a biographer presumably you would have liked her support, you would have liked when it came out to have known that she approved or agreed, certainly didn't come out with such strong criticism.

JB: I would have loved it and indeed I want to sort of reach out to her and say 'I could always write an afterword for the paperback edition' but maybe a little more of her part in Ted's life because for me in a way the one sad thing about the book is that because I was very very careful not to intrude upon her privacy she's quite a shadowy figure in the book but she was important to Ted and it would be wonderful to have her voice to sort of make sure the record is fully set straight because what I want above all is a book that is true and that honours the greatness of the man and his poetry.

Professor Jonathan Bate thank you very much.

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